Authentic Discussion in the Secondary English Classroom: Reasons for its Absence and A Case for its Resurrection

Lisa Ann Carpenter, University of Rhode Island

Abstract

In this article, the author makes a case for authentic discussion that promotes critical literacy to exist at the foundation of the secondary English classroom. A review of the existing literature reveals that all too often discussion does not take place in the classroom and when it does it is teacher-centered and relies on the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (I-R-E) method. The author argues that discussion is at the heart of the constructivist classroom and its absence results in passive, unengaged learners. Current societal issues such as a dependence on quick, instantaneous, technological communication and busy family schedules have contributed to the absence of authentic discussion in the classroom. The author concludes with suggestions about how secondary ELA educators might work to resurrect this teaching art and explains the implications for the student learning.

**Statement of the Problem**

“We have become aware that each classroom is a community, and that discourse is at its heart. It is discourse that connects people, that enables them to negotiate meaning in a situation or from a text, that enables a teacher to lead a class in new directions” (Barnitz, 1994).

Conversation surrounding story telling is the very foundation of the western literary tradition. It has the power to heighten imaginative capacities. It is the foundation of the social constructivist learning theories according to such seminal thinkers as Dewey, Freire and Vygotsky. Unfortunately, it is a dying tradition. Rampant, instantaneous communication in the form of texts or tiny social media sound bite conversation, in addition to current educational legislation that stresses isolated skills and recall, are incurring a damaging toll on classroom conversation and diminishing the ability of students and teachers to engage in substantial, thought-provoking dialogue.

The following excerpt describes an intensive four-year study conducted by anthropologist Elinor Ochs, director of UCLA’s Center on Everyday Lives of Families in 2006,

“We saw that when the working parent comes through the door, the other spouse and the kids are so absorbed by what they’re doing that they don’t give the arriving parent the time of day,” says Ochs. The returning parent generally the father, was greeted only about a third of the time, usually, with a perfunctory “Hi.” About half the time the kids ignored him or didn’t stop what they were doing, multitasking and monitoring their various electronic gadgets,” she says. “We also saw how difficult it was for parents to penetrate the child’s universe. We have so many videotapes of parents actually backing away, retreating, from kids who are absorbed by whatever they’re doing” (Wallis, 2006, p.1).

Ochs’ study represents a powerful and disturbing glimpse into the loss of communication within the American family. She uses the term “interpersonal connectivity” to describe teens (p.3) who are connected to a variety of electronic devices and are multitasking by carrying on instant messaging conversations, text conversations, and emailing. They could be involved in numerous e-conversations but how does this behavior affect students’ ability to engage in face-to face conversations in the classroom? How can teachers assist students, who are more confortable with e-exchanges than with real face-to-face discussions, develop the speaking and listening skills that will prepare them for college and for life?

The small sound bites of information not only diminish depth and articulation of thought, but they also increase stress when painful information is delivered without the human connectivity that is need in times of hardship and pain. Last year, two students, both members of the senior class at the high school where I teach, died for different reasons. One student recounts the experience of learning about both tragedies on a large social networking site:

In was tough work [writing an essay], but what made it tougher was when I went on a little break to go on Facebook to check out what was new. The new thing that night was that my friend, R, had died; he was only 18. I can’t even describe how I felt when I read, “RIP R” as everyone’s status. I felt like my heart stopped beating and there was an uncontrollable stream of tears coming from my eyes.

Unfortunately, this feeling wasn’t new to me, a few months earlier, my other friend M was in a fatal car accident; I found that out on Facebook too. What made their deaths even more painful than they already were, was that I had to find out from Facebook statuses. Reading all those characters saying that a friend of mine has passed gave me such uncertainty and an uneasy feeling. This constant anguish that I was left with caused me to grow “angry” toward Facebook and social networking in general (Personal communication, September 2011).

In addition to the emotional pain brought on by reading painful news in small sound bites, neurological research shows that the multi-tasking results in loss of depth of thought and quality of thinking (Wallis, p. 4). As such, the age of social media has widened the divide between coherent, articulate speech and instantaneous, small sound bites and symbols that express ideas, thoughts, and emotions. This evidence of the quick, tiny sound bite is present in both student writing and in speech. In addition to tiny, informal bits of communication, the age of “social” media, despite its name has also increased alienation among individuals, resulted in pronounced deficiencies in students’ skills and abilities to interact and listen to one another in real-life face-to-face situations. In 1998, Gavriel Salomon wrote, “The Internet, as its soothsayers predict with glee, will turn yesteryears’ campfire around which we all gathered once in a while to reiterate our shared culture into a thousand, nay, a million separate and unrelated campfires with no center to hold them together…alienation is likely to follow.”

Traditionally, the study of British literature in English classrooms begins with the first epic poem, *Beowulf*, originally told by word of mouth and later recorded by an anonymous poet in an archaic form of English. Students learn that the oral story telling tradition provided socialization, hope and entertainment for the masses when the struggle for survival was great and heroes were few. The gathering in the ancient mead hall around the Scop (Anglo Saxon version of a troubadour) was representative of the very first “campfire” or literary salon (Salon is defined as a social gathering in a public space designed to share and make meaning from stories and other works of art.) Listeners would be entertained while hearing the tale of a great hero willing to take on society’s challenges in the form of threats and at the same time, renew their faith in the resilience of the human condition.

Our modern age presents incredible challenges (though they may not be in the form of a man-eating beast who dwells in the swampy outskirts of society), the feasibility and desire to gather and dialogue around an aesthetic work has changed and lessened as both a social norm and as a form of instruction in the classroom. This is due in part to advances in technology and social media. Costigan and Dickson (2011, p. 148) note, “In the past 10 years, urban schools have seen changes in the autonomy teachers are given to develop stimulating curricula…accountability in the form of high-stakes testing and more standardized and homogenized methods of teaching has limited students’ authentic engagement with literature in favor of utilitarian goals.”

The problem is further compounded in states and districts that assess students on speaking and listening skills but do not have a program in place designed to instruct them on how to become proficient in said skills. The combination of literature that students find difficult to understand (such as those who maintain a strict canonical teaching that create difficulty in regard to students’ comprehension) in addition to their lack of speaking and listening skills, may present insurmountable challenges for a teacher expecting a conversation that will lead to increased critical literacy skills.

In a study of 58 ninth grade classrooms conducted in 1991, Nystrand and Gamaron found open-ended whole class discussion averaged 15 seconds a day and “were characterized by a high degree of procedural engagement but little substantive engagement” (p. 277). In another study by Laura Billings and Jill Fitzgerald entitled “Dialogic Discussion and the Paideia Seminar” (2002), it was concluded that dialogue “infrequently occurs in classrooms.” The first reason was that most classroom talk followed the IRE (initiation, response, evaluation) sequence; secondly, most talk focused on the teacher disseminating already-known information to students; thirdly, adolescent classrooms boys tended to talk and challenge more than girls; and lastly, the teacher tended to function as expert evaluator and students as passive observes in what they termed “teacher-fronted” discussions (p. 911). As such, students are receiving insufficient discussion-based instruction that could enhance their ability to develop independent critical literacy skills.

Critical literacy is defined as the type of thinking that challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development (Shor, 1999). It is the very philosophy on which our country and the idea of democratic schooling was founded. As such, critical theories on literature and discourse provide secondary English students with alternative dialogues and lenses with which to view and talk about literature that will lead them to new understandings and constructions of reality (Shor, 1999; Appleman, 2009). Skill and drill classrooms that teach to tests do not engage in the critical literacy skills that when properly scaffolded, may lead to the development of authentic classroom dialogue.

Another related aspect of the problem is that the current emphasis on national standards has clouded the question surrounding curriculum reform in ELA. Many have mistakenly identified the standards as content that should govern a skills-based curriculum instead of the other way around. Applebee (1997, p. 2003) acknowledges that, “In English language arts, this tension between knowledge and process made the development of national curriculum standards difficult and contentious.” When standards, rather than ideas, govern curricula content, there is inevitable danger of schools working with curricula that are not rigorous and do not espouse critical literacy and higher order critical thinking skills. When this occurs the fallout may include resistance from students who will associate schooling with a reproduction process rather than a democratic or equalization process (Alpert, 1991, p. 351). The ultimate result is secondary English classrooms filled with passive, ill-behaved and unengaged learners.

Talk is important for students to ensure cognitive develop and to monitor and regulate their own learning. As such, this literature review concerns the need for authentic dialogue in the secondary English classroom. Dewey wrote that every experience was a moving force (1936, p. 27) and that the teacher resides in a critical role as being able to provide experiences that move students toward active engagement in a democratic community.

This review suggests that the authentic classroom discussions that pervaded some liberal arts classrooms of the past and some constructivist classrooms of the present, (such as that of Elizabeth Coleman, President of Bennington College in Vermont), are worth looking to once again for inspiration and information on how to engage students in authentic learning that not only cultivates critical literacy and higher order critical thinking skills, but also engages them in active learning and increases motivation to learn.

In the process of reviewing the available literature, this article will answer the following questions:

* **Why focus on classroom discussion?**
* **How is classroom discussion defined?**
* **What conditions influence classroom discussion?**
* **How can teachers foster classroom discussion?**

The conclusion will summarize the available literature, provide implications for teacher practice in the secondary English language arts classroom as well as a conceptual framework for implementation, and offer suggestions for future research. All graphs are placed at the end of the document.

**Why focus on classroom discussion?**

In a quantitative study employing a series of hierarchical linear models, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamson (2003) determined that students who have classroom experiences in which discussion-based approaches are utilized “in the context of high academic demands internalize the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in challenging literacy tasks on their own” (p.685). Secondary English courses have always been the focus of a school’s curriculum in terms of teaching all aspects of the functions of language. Citing the seminal works of Cazden (1988) and Mehan (1979), Applebee et al notes that the I-R-E (initiation, response, evaluation) pedagogy which has dominated English classrooms in the past, and may still continue to do so (2003, p.689), is ineffective in developing the deep understandings that students need to independently perform critical literacy tasks.

Twenty schools were involved in Applebee’s study, both urban and suburban, middle and high school, for a total of 1,412 students (2003, p. 697). Classes were observed discussing literature. Each class was observed four times and data included student and teacher questionnaires, Nystrand’s program for analyzing classroom discussions, and measures of student literacy performance (p. 698). Class observations rated items such as when students were asking questions that demonstrated comprehension, when students challenged the text, and when the teachers’ questions required analysis.

Applebee et al (p. 707) discovered that in tracked situations, students in higher tracked classrooms engaged in more discussion than students in lower tracked classrooms. Prior to this study, most discussion-based studies had looked at a specific set of techniques, while they examined the general presence and extent of discussion and related activities, “the positive results that we obtained suggest that the spontaneous scaffolding or support for developing ideas that are generated during open discussions is a powerful tool for learning” (Applebee, 2003, p. 722).

Many school mission statements including that of the author’s school focus, in part on creating students that are prepared to fulfill their democratic, civic responsibilities in society. Students are able to utilize critical literacy tools are more prepared to perform this function. Literacy has the potential to transform one’s understanding of self (identity) and in turn, understanding of his or her role in the world (agency); (Beach, p. 19). The high school classroom that explores literature (canon or contemporary) is the perfect place to explore humanity and engage in what Wilhelm and Novak (2011) term the “reflective dimension” (p. 123) or a “living discourse” which engages the reader in what it means to be human. This involves connecting present to past, considering the lives of others, and reconsidering our own lives.

Wilhelm and Novak (2011) point out that unlike other subject areas, it is difficult to explain exactly what a teacher of English teaches. The language arts strands are defined as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. But the question remains, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing what? Although standards such as the Common Core define what skills should be learned, as of yet there remains no national curriculum that defines what texts should be used. As such, the English teacher may have some freedom as to what text is used to prompt discussion and fulfill the skills involved with language arts study. This potential freedom requires that secondary English teachers not only examine possible texts, but also examine how and why these texts are discuss in the classroom and the extent to which the teacher should has as the expect or the facilitator. Van den Branden (2000) conducted research that indicated the beneficial effects of discussion when students had difficulty comprehending text.

**How is classroom discussion defined?**

While most teachers agree that discussion is importance, they sometimes disagree about what constitutes discussion (Kletzien & Baloche, 1994, p. 540). Some teachers view discussion as an I-R-E model as mentioned before when teachers ask informational questions, students take turns answering, and then the teacher evaluates the answers (p. 541). This literature review takes the stance that this view does not constitute authentic discussion. Rather, true discussion is an open exchange of ideas with no predetermined outcome (p. 541). Teachers act as facilitators, not experts, and student respond to each other and “in these exchanges, students clarify and refine their thinking and expand their views by hearing others’ interpretations” (p. 541).

Hadjioannou (2007) defines authentic classroom discussion as a speech genre in which participants explore ideas and opinions in which the objective is “to reach new and more sophisticated understandings” (p. 371). Authentic discussion occurs when no specific conclusion is specified, participants have diverse roles, connections with experiences are made, and these connections are characterized by an exploratory nature (p. 370).

Nystrand, drawing on the works of Vygotsky, notes that during discussion, students will be placed in positions of defending their position to others as they search for meaning and this act leads to cognitive growth (2006, p. 398).

Critical literacy plays a central role in classroom discussion because it allows students to put on different lenses in order to use a variety of theories to examine literature. Once students are old enough to psychologically grasp that their personal subjective opinion is not the only way to view text, they are old enough to examine literary works through multiple perspectives. Appleman (2003) teachers eleven different theories that can be used to examine text such as gender theory or Marxist/ social theory. Beach et al (2009) explain that critical literacy involves the “unpacking of systems of meaning” (p. ix) for the purpose of “disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, focusing on the sociopolitical, and taking social action” (p. ix).

Nystrand who wrote a review on literature concerning classroom discourse in 2006, emphasizes that it may be difficult to note immediate educational effects in regard to the research surrounding classroom discussion in a climate of “evidence-based pedagogy” (p.393). This is primarily the case because authentic discussion cannot be understood mechanically but rather it must be viewed as an organic process in which “desirable effects, particularly in English language arts, are often oblique rather than direct” (Nystrand, 2006, p. 393).

**What conditions influence classroom discussion?**

Nystrand and Gamoran maintain that, “Significant academic achievement is not possible without sustained, substantive engagement which transcends procedural engagement” (1991, p. 262). The majority of students’ involvement in formal schooling is procedural in which they go through the motions of school. In contrast, substantive engagement “depends on students’ psychological investment in class activities, and fully played out, this investment will lead to mastery” (p. 263). The difficulty lies in measurement what constitutes “engagement.” Nystrand and Gamoran note that a possibility of the measurement of engagement could be questions that a students asks (not connected to procedural issues), the presence of sustained attention, or perhaps engagement can’t even be measured until after the student has left school (p. 263). With such a dilemma, it is worth investigating the conditions that may promote engagement in classroom discussion.

One way to create the foundation for engagement is to ask authentic, open-ended questions with no prespecified answers (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991, p. 264). This may be difficult for some because it requires the teacher to give up some of the control and allow students to “have input into the business of learning” (p. 266). In their study, Nystrand and Gamaron hypothesized the “student engagement is a cognitive phenomenon having to do with the extent to which students are mentally involved with the issues and problems of academic study” (p. 269). They studied 58 eighth-grade English classes in 16 Midwestern schools (p. 270). Each class was visited four times by an evaluator trained to observe instructional discourse. They coded data sources that included student tests, questionnaires, teacher questionnaires, and classroom observations. They coded for questions that included procedural questions, rhetorical questions, and discourse-maintenance/ authentic questions.

Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) were also coding for high levels of teacher evaluation, which involved a teacher validating a students’ response, and asking a follow-up questions which prompted further exploration. As noted earlier in the problem statement section of this review, little time was spent on substantive engagement within the 58 classrooms studied. They found, however, that “teachers who spend more time in discussion were more likely to assign authentic writing tasks and respond to writing at a high level, more likely to treat readings authentically, and more likely to use uptake and other forms of contiguity in their lessons” (p. 278).

Hadjioannou (2007) points out that although there is much praise for discussion-based approaches within the educational community, there are many variables that may determine whether or not authentic discussion can take place in a classroom. These factors include the physical environment, curriculum concerns, teacher and student beliefs about discussion, relationships among the students in the class, and classroom norms regarding participation (P. 371). Hadjioannou’s qualitative study, published in the American Educational Research Journal, utilized recordings from class sessions, interviews and field notes to examine how the above list of conditions influenced classroom discussion.

If the teacher has not fostered a relationship of trust within the classroom and shown an interest in nurturing the students’ ideas, it could impair the ability to conduct authentic discussion in the classroom (Hadjioannou, 2007). In an earlier study by the same researcher (2003), it was found that a common elements that lead to productive class discussion included a teacher who circulates around the room, does not stress test-taking techniques and test preparation and creates different configurations of furniture conducive to comfort and belonging (2007, pp. 376-377).

A sense of humor and playfulness (Hadjioannou) is also a factor in case studies where conversation played a significant role in the classroom.

Teachers who support the social constructivist framework of learning wand how allow students to explore their ideas are most likely to place an emphasis on classroom conversation (Hadjioannou, 2007). Those teachers who belief more strongly in direct instruction or skills-based instruction would be less likely to develop students critical literacy through authentic discussion. It is those teachers who establish a humane and liberating classroom that may have success “reshaping imagination…released through many sorts of dialogue” and only then are the “young stirred to reach out on their own initiatives. Apathy and indifference are likely to give way as images of what might be arise” (Greene, 1995, p.5).

**How can teachers foster classroom discussion?**

According to Mary Louise Pratt (1977) teachers create contact zones in which they utilize literacy practices that ask students to adopt critical postures toward both the text and their own use of language. Although Pratt wrote over thirty years ago her ideas are timeless and relevant to promoting authentic discussion in class. They include attending to all forms of rhetoric, exercises in identifying with others, defining ground rules for community, and creating a safe and comfortable environment within the classroom.

In order for authentic discussion to occur, a learning community of trust and respect must be established and maintained. Beach et al (2010) believe that those teachers who adopt and “inquiry stance” to learning or more apt to success and point out that “this type of creative and intellectual work cannot be learned prescriptively” (p. 23). Figure A At the conclusion to the article visual displays how literature tools used for transformation (including authentic discussion) can affect four different aspects of student learning: identity, agency, critical inquiry, and the construction of spaces. This mode of literacy learning is grounded not only in constructivist theory, but also in social justice and change theory that encourages the assessment of students based on their use of literacy tools to cultivate their own identities and beliefs rather than the assessment of isolated language arts skills.

Maxine Greene writes that teaching with conversation occurs best when teachers are able to encourage students to perceive connections, view alternatives and devise new orders (2001). In her extensive writings that stress an imaginative and aesthetic framework, she writes that teachers should spend more time thinking about the actual spaces that are created for dialogue (2001, p. 124). Greene advocates for expanding the traditional curriculum with new texts that bring a modern audience into the joys of stories and spark conversation. It is up to the teacher to choose the right kinds of materials that will bring readers into new worlds and expose them to new cultures and ideas while stressing that “so much depends on our—the teachers’ own recognition that meanings must be achieved by those with a sense of agency; they do not preexist, to be dug up like nuggets of coal” (p.124). So both the quality of the text and its relevance to the audience are related to the dialogue that has the potential to occur.

Maxine Greene also stresses that students must be afforded the opportunity to use text in order to explore their own personal narrative and this too could lead to transforming, authentic dialogue. She writes that it is an obligation of the aesthetic and constructivist teacher to find ways in which students can find their own voices (2001, p. 120). Possibilities abound for accomplishing this goal. Some teachers suggest the use of fishbowl or concentric circles to allow students to explore and build on ideas (Kletzien & Baloche, 1994, p. 542). Fishbowl occurs when an inner circle of students discusses a text while the outer circle observes and takes notes on aspects of the discussion such as how many times a particular student speaker or how many times a particular theme is mentioned. In the circle activity the student come prepared with index cards (about an event in a text and what this event may reveal about a character) that they have completed for homework and a student from the inner circle discusses their card with a partner in the outer circle. The partner is instructed to ask clarifying questions. After this,

Next, students in the outer circle share their events and interpretations. After both sets of explanations, the students trade cards, and the students in the outer circle rotate clockwise so that each student in the class now faces a new partner. Students must now explain the event and characterization represented by the new card they hold, the card given to them by the previous partner. With little teacher intervention, the students review many of the novel’s critical events and share many interpretations of the characters as they continue to move around the circle (Kietzen & Baloche, p. 542).

To elaborate on this teacher obligation, Nystrand and Gamoran stress that authentic discussion depends on how students and teachers interact, “teachers are key to creating classrooms where reciprocity is respected and possible. It is, after all, teachers who must carefully attuned their questions and assignments to student interests, expectations, and abilities, which they must take seriously and obviously respect” (1991, p. 284).

Teachers “however, are rarely given any information or practical approaches to teaching students how to discuss or how to evaluate the process of discussion so they may build upon and learn from the interaction” (Smith & Smith, 1994, p 582). Smith and Smith propose an activity for a “discussion simulation” in which the teacher assigns students roles that are likely to either support or hinder authentic discussion. An example of a role likely to support discussion is “ask someone to support your point of view—for example, call them by name: Jane, don’t you agree?” and an example of a role likely to negatively affect the class discussion is “ You’re bored! Act it out nonverbally. Look at a book or out the window” (p. 584). These roles are written on “Role Behavior Card” and students who are not assigned one, are assigned the task of observing and recording the roles that positively or adversely affect the discussion (p. 583). They suggest that the “art and science of discussion is teachable” (p. 585). Their additional suggestions are that students must sit facing each other, roles should rotate among students, and judgments should be based on criteria that can be supported and explained (p. 585).

In the seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2008), Freire stresses that an underlying faith in humankind is essential in order to foster authentic dialogue and trust is established through its use (91). He notes that, “conversely, such trust is obviously absent in the anti-dialogues of the banking method of education.”

**Conclusion**

More research needs to be done on how teachers can utilize authentic discussion in the secondary English classroom. In recent years two additional facets have been added to the existing research: teachers themselves are conducting more and more has been done on the relationship between the content of classroom talk and specific curriculum goals (Cazden, 1995, p. 384). Nevertheless, there is a need for more in terms of allowing teachers to balance the isolated skills stressed in standards-based curricula with the obvious need to develop critical literacy.

In her speech filmed in 2009 on Talk Talks, Liz Coleman, President of Bennington College said, “History provides a laboratory in which to see the actual as well as the intended consequences of ideas.” She describes an action-oriented curriculum as one that stresses rhetoric, design, and mediation. The author believes that a classroom that effectively utilizes authentic discussion capitalizes on what has worked well historically from time of Plato to modern terms that effectively uses the power of technology to promote rather than hinder inquiry.

**Summary of Findings**

**What are the implications for policy making and teacher practice?**

* Policy makers must consider the artistry behind the type of teaching that is required to facilitate authentic classroom discussions and consider the reality of balancing this with the high stakes testing and accountability (Hadjioannou, 2007, p. 395).
* Principals, even in a state that stresses standardized test scores as most do, need to trust in the teachers’ professional knowledge and pedagogical skills to develop critical literacy with talk and discussion (Hadjioannou).
* As demonstrated in Figure B created by the author, students can use literacy tools to further develop their sense of agency and validate their membership in a learning community that has the potential to creative active participation (Beach et al).

Figure A. Four Purposes for Uses of Literary Tools (adapted from Beach et al, 2010, p.21)

Figure B. Created by the author to explain the differences and commonalities among critical thinking, critical literacy, and critical theory

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